

BUNGO

STRAY DOGS

KAFKA ASAGIRI Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

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THE
UNTOLD
ORIGINS
OF THE
DETECTIVE
AGENCY



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OF THE DETECTIVE AGENCY



If only someone could just knock me unconscious right about now...

Despite the fact that Fukuzawa had met Ranpo only that morning, you would need to combine an entire life's worth of exhaustion and multiply it by three to understand how he felt.

Thanks to Fukuzawa's fatigue, his mind was finally able to catch up with what was going on.

No matter how carrying—scratch that, *obnoxiously loud*—his voice was, it should be impossible to be able to hear it this well in a massive theater that could hold four hundred people. In addition, the lights hanging from the ceiling couldn't be controlled from where Ranpo was standing. There had to be someone working things from the control room.

Fukuzawa looked back at the window at the top of the auditorium. On the other side of the dimly lit window before the control panel was Ms. Egawa, smiling and giving a thumbs-up.

They were in this together. Accomplices.

Ms. Egawa must have given Ranpo a small wireless microphone, which was why his voice was projecting so well. From there, she waited for the right moment and used the control panel to turn on the lights just as they had planned.

"Now, join me as I unravel the mystery! I'll be skipping over the boring synopsis of the murder, solely because it'd be boring. After all, what you sad non-skill users really want to know is what happened to the leading actor who was stabbed in the end. Allow me to explain."

The nausea Fukuzawa had been feeling reached its climax. Ranpo was planning on unveiling the truth from atop the stage. The spectators were still buzzing, but there was a clear change in the mood now.

The audience's focus was slowly returning to the center of the stage where the young man was apparently going to solve the mystery, despite the absurdity of an amateur boasting so openly. The decision of what to do with him could be made after he was finished talking, whether it be putting a stop to him or making a fuss.

Without anyone's knowledge, a deep silence reigned over the crowd. It felt as if the continuation of the play was about to begin. Whether this was Ranpo's objective or pure coincidence wasn't clear, but Ranpo surveyed the silent crowd and confidently smirked before saying:

"Listen carefully. I heard a good bit of you in the crowd whispering that you thought an angel killed him. Sounds like your reasoning is that the timing was perfect, and it looked like he was stabbed by an invisible sword from the sky. So let me just take a moment to say this." Ranpo paused for a moment. "There *is* an angel."

A stir rippled through the crowd. Ranpo raised his hand into the air to cease the uproar.

"To back up this claim, the death threat that was sent to the theater the other day accurately predicted that an angel would kill the performer. It was clearly referring to the 'angel' in the play when it was written."

The crowd started buzzing.

It was no surprise because *the death threat was never made public*.

Fukuzawa was at his wits' end. From the playgoers' point of view, the fact that people knew there was going to be a murder beforehand completely changed their view of the situation.

Was it really okay to tell them that?

But Ranpo showed no concern for the audience's worries.

"However, the angel isn't what you're imagining. They said it in the play. The angel was invisible to the characters in the story, but the angel could see everything they did. In other words, the angel was the audience. The audience knew almost exactly what was happening but never laid a hand on the characters onstage. It was a metaphor—it meant the angel couldn't be the killer. If anything, the angel...was a victim."

Ranpo paused. He surveyed the audience while waiting before he revealed the secret, as if he were trying to build suspense. Then he slowly began to walk across the stage toward the crowd. It was theatrical.

“The murder and the play’s story are connected on a deep level. This play reversed the tide of the narrative. A group of fallen angels tried to return to the heavens, but the angel of judgment tried to stop them. Meanwhile, the angel’s judgment was but a show, and the supposed victim, a human, faked it. The angel’s and humans’ roles were reversed, switching the judge and the judged. That’s the kind of play this was. And this structure isn’t any different...”

After taking in a deep breath, Ranpo continued, “It was applied to the murder itself as well.” He stuck out a finger and pointed at the front-row seats. “As you can see, there is an empty seat here.”

The audience turned their gaze toward the seat. It was where the gentleman suspect had been sitting before running away.

“The city police believe that man was the killer and are looking for him. Why? Because he disappeared right after the murder. I mean, it’s only normal to think that the true culprit ran away. But as I mentioned earlier, the narrative is in reverse. Our structures have been swapped along with the victim and killer as well. In other words—he isn’t the killer, but a victim.”

Thereupon, Ranpo quietly stared into the audience. Nobody said a word. They got lost in what Ranpo was saying, even forgetting to breathe.

“There is a place in this closed-off theater that not even the police have searched.” Ranpo then turned his back to the audience and started to walk. “Because it’s the worst place for someone who wants to hide. For you see, there would be countless witnesses. Plus, if it isn’t someone who works in the theater, they would stick out like a sore thumb... Just like I am right now. Yes... I am talking about *here*.”

Ranpo walked to the very back of the stage where there was a white screen to project the backgrounds onto. Then he tore down the cloth screen without a moment of hesitation.

“The victim was here all along.”

The gentleman from earlier was tied up and unconscious on the floor. He’d probably been injected with something. Sweat ran down his pale face, and his closed eyes showed no sign of opening anytime soon. Nevertheless, it appeared he was still alive.

“This is the reverse. The killer became the victim. Now...curiosity begs us to ask who was this man, and why was he kidnapped? Of course, all we would have to do is ask the killer that. Isn’t that right, killer?” Ranpo yelled out into empty space, but nobody answered. “The audience is waiting for an answer. A murder story cannot be complete without a killer, and there’s nothing worse than an incomplete story!”

Ranpo roared. It was as if he were a performer himself. A good one, at that. Did he learn how to do this from watching today’s performance? Or...was there a reason why he had to do this?

“This story reversed the tide of narrative. The killer became the victim. *So then...what will the victim become?* It’s time to bring this story to its climax. Nothing else matters at this point. This story won’t be following your script anymore!” Ranpo stomped the floor with the sole of his shoe, and the thud echoed throughout the theater. “This child of God demands you to show yourself, fallen angel! You may be able to fool them, but you cannot fool me! This is the climax! There will be no other ending to your story! Let the truth be revealed to the angel, the son of God, and the blameless people seated here!”

The echoes of his voice gradually died down until the room was overcome with perfect silence. But only for a moment, until another voice soon broke that silence.

“What a marvelous ending!”

The owner of the voice suddenly appeared onstage. Astonishment fell over the entire theater. His voice echoed with full-bodied resonance. Every part of his body was brimming with life as he moved. It was, without a doubt, the tragic hero.

“I never expected an actual skill user, the stuff of fairy tales, to show up and solve the mystery. After all that, you left me with no choice but to show myself. But how did you know? The police, that bodyguard—not even my fellow performers figured it out.”

Murakami appeared onstage as if he had come back from the dead to play a character. He smiled. Ranpo pushed up his glasses and replied, “That’s my skill. The blood was real, the weapon was real, and the surprised reactions of the

bodyguard and performers were real. But nothing gets past my skill. There was never a murder to begin with.”

“How long did you know?” questioned Murakami sonorously.

“From the very beginning.” But there was no emotion attached to Ranpo’s blunt tone. “When I first met you in the dressing room, you were really pale, and extremely thirsty. That was because you *had your blood drawn* a little earlier. When blood leaves the body, it almost immediately begins to degrade. Plus, you would be surrounded by a bodyguard and the police, who’ve seen their fair share of blood, when you ‘died.’ That’s why you couldn’t use theatrical blood to fake anyone out. You needed to use your own, fresh blood. And the reason why you wore loose-fitting layered clothing was that it was the perfect place for hiding the blade and bags of blood.”

“I see.”

Ranpo and Murakami faced each other with the center-stage spotlight dividing them. Each stared at the other in silence.

“It would probably have been harder to fake your death without preparing the blood in advance, but you are a professional, after all. All you had to do was put on some makeup to hide your pale complexion, then let your acting do the talking. Also, this is how you faked your pulse. I found it hidden in the trash can near the service entrance.”

Ranpo pulled out a skin-colored rubber-made sheet of film from his pocket.

“It’s a piece of silicone rubber that actors use to change the shape of their body or face for a costume. I found five times this many torn up in the trash. A quick glance was all it took to see there were enough pieces to cover your wrists and around your chest and neck to make it hard to check your pulse.”

Fukuzawa thought back to the incident.

Had the actor’s skin felt odd when Fukuzawa checked his pulse? Even looking back, it was hard to tell. At the very least, he was more concerned about Murakami’s fate. Fukuzawa had paid no attention to how the actor’s skin felt after briefly touching it.

Most convincing was Murakami’s expression. Even Fukuzawa, who had

witnessed many deaths before, and the actress who rushed over were fooled. One glance alone was enough to see that it was “too late.” Murakami’s acting carried complete conviction. Perhaps Fukuzawa would have figured things out as well if it weren’t for that.

Ranpo continued his sonorous speech.

“The only thing I had left to do was call the hospital you were transported to. There was an emergency patient named Tokio Murakami who died of his wounds, but when I asked what he looked like, they told me he was an old man in his sixties. You probably switched out IDs with someone who just happened to be similarly injured like you. The police would’ve figured it out soon enough.”

“I had an accomplice.” Murakami smiled.

“Figured.” Ranpo nodded as if it were obvious. “The playwright?”

“Precisely,” answered Murakami. “We planned this together. Probably at home relaxing as we speak.”

A few officers rushed out of the theater. They probably left to give orders to apprehend Murakami’s accomplice.

“The silicone padding, the hospital, the blood—there was so much evidence that you didn’t even have to go looking for it. All that’s left is a confession. That’s why”—Ranpo suddenly paused before his lips mischievously curled—“I prepared a place better suited for you than a dismal, boring interrogation room with the police. Enjoy.”

With that, Ranpo pointed into the air, and the lights went out. The theater was devoured by darkness. Without even a second to react, a thin pillar of light rained down over Murakami’s head, and Ranpo vanished into the abyss, as if Murakami were the only one left onstage. Everyone’s eyes silently focused on him.

“I...,” muttered Murakami in almost a whisper. He raised his voice and continued, “I am an actor! I become someone I am not and live a life that doesn’t exist! My job is to expose *what it means to be human*! It doesn’t matter if I play the lead part or a minor part. It doesn’t matter if I am a villain or hero. I become them with every part of my body! There is no other job for me! This is

the only way I can live!”

The audience was captivated. Murakami, who had played and spoken as countless characters onstage, was now speaking genuinely from the heart. His sincerity was so great that the pain accompanying it was palpable. The audience couldn't look away.

“But there is one thing that cannot be avoided while acting on the stage of life, and that is death! Death is not the opposite of life; it is life's symbol and banner. However, it also provides a great paradox! Nobody alive has every experienced it! That's why to me, the greatest job of all would be performing the death of a person. Not death as a device or a mere convention, but real death that I could convey to the audience. That was the pinnacle of theatrical performance to me. And this is the outcome of my toil.”

Murakami took a step toward the crowd, then yelled:

“Could you see it? Death is always hanging over our heads! Without a voice, it quietly waits for us! Theater and movies desperately try to express the idea with their structure, editing, music, and thoughtful dialogue. However, they can never express death itself! I am the first to ever perform death! And that is something I wanted everyone who came here today to behold!”

The audience was speechless. Fukuzawa probably felt the same way.

So that was his motive... He sent out a fake death threat and got innocent people involved. He played the victim and fooled the police. He drew his own blood and created two scripts to deceive his colleagues. All this trouble he put himself through...

That was just how important this was to him?

Or were performers simply born this way?

“I have no regrets,” stated Murakami. “This is the way I live. Performers do not need a stage. I will live on from the fruitful outcome of today, performing in others' hearts until eternal rest is granted unto me.”

Silence reigned. Nobody said a word. Eventually, the police slowly climbed to the stage and handcuffed Murakami. He didn't resist. He even seemed cheerful. It wasn't any surprise, though. He had accomplished his goal.

“I thought you were amazing,” Ranpo suddenly said from behind as Murakami was being taken away. “I didn’t quite understand all of it myself, but I don’t think it’s something that just anyone could do. By the way, take a look at the audience. Look at their faces.”

The light from the stage dimly illuminated the crowd. It probably looked like rows of countless faces to Murakami. And everyone’s expression...was the same.

“There are people here from all ages and genders, but they have two things in common. One is that they love your troupe’s acting, which is why they came. The other is they all witnessed the moment someone was killed right before their eyes.”

Murakami stopped breathing. His eyes were glued on the audience.

“You said your job was entertainment, right? But could you really call it that... when you look at their expressions?”

For the first time, Murakami’s eyes showed a sign of weakness.

“...I see.”

A small voice, unlike what one would expect from a stage actor with a powerful voice, fell from the stage.

“I was...only performing for myself.”

Broken in spirit, Murakami retired from the theater. The lights on the stage disappeared, and only silence followed. There was no drawing of the curtain or curtain call. There was no applause from the audience and no finale to end the play. Only silence.

When Fukuzawa returned to the lobby, Ranpo was proudly waiting for him with his hands on his hips.

“How did it feel?” Fukuzawa quietly asked Ranpo while walking over.

“I feel...”

Ranpo paused with a bold smile, then raised his voice so that the entire lobby

could hear him declare:

“I feel sooo much better now!”

Figured...

The lobby was jam-packed with patrons who had since been allowed to leave their seats. Some people were calling their family, some were fervently discussing the incident among themselves, others still were idly thinking back about what just happened. On top of that, the city police and the theater staff were busily running in and out of the room, dealing with the aftermath. Some people were angry, some were sad, and some were bewildered. Among the crowd, Fukuzawa thought, *Thank goodness*.

His mind was at ease. Nobody died, and Ranpo solved the case. The rest was trivial. There was a group of three women in the lobby crying. They must have been Murakami’s fans. While passing by, Fukuzawa overheard them saying, “I’m just glad he’s alive!” Fukuzawa basically felt no different.

Looking back, no one could have asked for a more logical approach from Ranpo’s peculiar stage detective work. Even if he just unveiled the truth and the criminal, the criminal would have run away, and the audience would have been traumatized after witnessing a murder. It would have ended only with some light shed on the circumstantial evidence, thus leaving a deep scar on those who worked with Murakami. Just uncovering the truth wasn’t enough. Dragging Murakami out in front of everyone and having him confess was an absolute requirement. But to do that, Ranpo needed Murakami, a born actor, to believe there was no use in hiding any longer. Nothing could have been better than using the audience to draw him out. Ranpo’s entire monologue was for that moment.

“Revealing the truth onstage was a brilliant idea,” complimented Fukuzawa.

“Right?” Ranpo proudly smirked. “I’d always wanted to scream out whatever I wanted, just once. Did you see the blank looks on their faces? Seems like everyone knows just how amazing I am now! *Whew*. As a master detective, nothing beats unraveling a mystery in front of a large group of people! Just a universal truth.”

Something wasn’t sitting well with Fukuzawa.

“Wait. You unveiled the mystery onstage because—”

“I wanted the attention,” answered Ranpo with a straight face. It was as if he wanted to say, “Of course. Why else would I have done that?”

“.....Oh, okay.”

“Anyway, these glasses are amazing! The moment I put them on, my mind gets sharper, and all deductions reveal themselves to me! Those Kyoto elites sure have some amazing treasures! I feel so alive. I finally understand who I am! With these glasses and my skill, nobody can beat me!”

Ranpo was gleefully scrutinizing the black-framed spectacles. Of course, it was all in his head. There was nothing special about them. Everything Ranpo did, he did himself. He figured out what really happened just from the little information he got in Murakami’s dressing room. It was an extraordinary achievement born from the hastily made fib that his ability was the reason why he knew the truth.

Fukuzawa suddenly remembered a question he had that still had no answer.

“I saw something vaguely square-shaped and metallic behind the lights, close to the ceiling. What was that?”

“Oh, that? Here.”

Ranpo picked up something he had leaning against the wall.

“...Aluminum foil?”

“Yep. Just an ordinary square board. It’s a piece of reflector used for photography. Although it was used to temporarily mess with the investigation this time. I found it just lying on the ground in the shadow of a large prop on the stage wing.”

Fukuzawa groaned. It was light, so it could be easily pulled down with some string and taken home. The main reason Fukuzawa had thought there was an external device that had killed Murakami was because he’d seen the reflection. While it was only supposed to be a temporary decoy, it was created with very fine detail and thought.

“One more thing. How did you convince Ms. Egawa to help?”

Her transformation was significant enough to puzzle even Fukuzawa. She’d

handled the lights with a smile and given the thumbs-up. How was Ranpo able to get on her good side like that?

“I didn’t really have to convince her to do anything. The moment I saw her, I knew she wanted to do stage production—lights, sound, that sort of thing. So I just told her I thought she seemed like she’d be good at it and asked if she could help. That’s all. She said she finally made up her mind and was going to start following her dream starting tomorrow.”

No wonder she was in such a good mood. Having one’s talents complimented by someone as gifted as Ranpo would probably change anyone.

“Good work, you two!” A city police officer briskly approached them and bowed. “That was beautiful; got me right here! When Watchdog here was checking the scene of the crime, I knew he was going to be able to solve this complicated case...but wow! I had no idea he was armed with a secret weapon! Mighty fine work, Detective!”

It was the young uniformed officer whom Fukuzawa was talking to earlier. Ranpo’s smug grin widened every time he was called Detective by the officer, while Fukuzawa’s expression was best described as *dubious*.

“Leave the rest to us. There’s still some paperwork that needs to get done, and we’ll need you to come to the station to outline the events for us, but—”

“An outline of the events?” asked Ranpo.

“Yep. Just a basic rundown of what you saw and heard that led you to solving the case.”

“Huh...? I mean, that’s fine, but my written statement’s just gonna say ‘Because I’m a skill user.’”

“A—a ‘skill user’? You mean like from the play?”

“Uh-huh,” Ranpo said with a nod.

Oh, great. I wasn’t expecting that.

“Officer, wait. Allow me to handle the interview at the station. As you can see, Ranpo is still a boy. He’s new to this and exhausted from the investigation. He gave me his version of the incident, so I should be able to—”

“The heck? I’m totally fine. If anything, I feel better now than when we got here.”

Ranpo curiously tilted his head. He was telling the truth. His skin had seemed to be glowing ever since he stole the show.

“Wait... This amazing young detective is a skill user?” The officer’s eyes opened wide.

“That’s right! The skill user capable of knowing the truth behind every case, the master detective Ranpo Edogawa!”

“Wait... Wait.” Fukuzawa stopped him in a fluster. “Ranpo, I wasn’t going to tell you this, but you’re not a skill user. You were able to uncover the truth through observation and reasoning alone. That’s why—”

“Huh?” Ranpo seemed bewildered. “What are you talking about? That’s impossible. Besides, you were the one who told me it was a skill in the first place.”

“Yes, but—”

“The reason I’m special is because I’m a skill user. Do you really think it would be possible for me to see things that others don’t, otherwise?”

“I sure don’t. I am just a dumb cop, though.”

“Listen, you—”

“Oh, hey! Is that a police car?! Whoa! Are we gonna get in that and go to the station?”

“If that’s what you want, I can make it happen.”

“Hold on. Listen to me.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You cops better start buttering me up while you can! I’m sure it’s obvious, but I could steal all your jobs! A skill that can solve cases is a godsend! On second thought, it’s better than that! It’s God itself! I am God!”

“Oh, I’m not worthy! Thank the heavens for bestowing you upon us!”

“H-hold on, you two...”

Fukuzawa was at a loss. The lie he told to save Ranpo was slowly growing. At

this rate, the white lie was only going to get bigger until the damage was irreversible.

However...

"I feel so alive. I finally understand who I am!"

When Fukuzawa first met Ranpo, the boy was a cynic who had turned his back to the world, but now he was carefree, smiling, and so full of life.

Forget it.

Just because it was his extraordinary mind and not a skill didn't make Ranpo any less exceptional. If anything, his talents would make even a skill user goggle. So one could argue that he was being humble whenever he called himself a skill user. Besides, Ranpo wasn't always going to be able to solve mysteries with such ease, and when that happened...was he going to find out the truth for himself? Or would Fukuzawa be there to break it to him?

That was when Fukuzawa finally realized his thoughts were heading in a bizarre direction:

—Ranpo solving more difficult mysteries.

—Fukuzawa, right there with him.

"So we're going to the station, right?"

Ranpo's voice dragged Fukuzawa back into reality.

"I really wanna ride in the police car, but just thinking about doing paperwork and being interviewed is boring me to tears. I'm just gonna get in there and out in two seconds and go home. It'll probably take forever to get it over with if you're there, old guy, so I'll go on ahead, okay?"

Fukuzawa didn't reply.

"Hey, you listening? I'm leaving...?"

"...Hmm? Oh, okay."

Ranpo looked up at Fukuzawa for a few moments.

"Oh? I see... Anyway, about ready to go, Officer?" Ranpo asked before patting the officer on the back.

Absurd. Working together with Ranpo from now on? Solving cases together? Absolute nonsense.

However, Ranpo was truly extraordinary. Somebody had to protect that talent and utilize it to its fullest potential. On the other hand, Fukuzawa had always been alone ever since that one incident. He didn't need anyone's help, and he didn't feel the need to work together with others. To Fukuzawa, depending on others meant there was something he lacked. Deliberately ignoring his own shortcomings and relying on others would only warp who he was.

He could also become a demon that killed others if his allies so requested. He could hardly even imagine teaming up with someone, let alone creating an agency and becoming its leader.

Many people had witnessed Ranpo's talents bloom today. Nobody was going to put him on phone duty or make him run errands at a construction site ever again. Whether it be for good or evil, somebody was going to use Ranpo's talents and do something big. Perhaps the day would come when he would rise to the top of some group of thieves or an illegal organization. But that day wasn't today; therefore, it had nothing to do with Fukuzawa himself.

"I'm going to discuss the aftermath with Ms. Egawa," Fukuzawa said to Ranpo. "You go ahead to the station. Officer, take good care of him for me."

"You got it," the officer replied with a smile.

"Come on! Let's go!"

Ranpo hopped over to the exit with mirth in his step, and Fukuzawa's eyes were naturally drawn to him. All of a sudden, Ranpo stopped at the exit and turned around.

"*Mr. Fukuzawa,*" he said with a smile. "Thank you."

And just like that, he got into the police car and left.

Fukuzawa went to see Murakami after that. The dressing room was being used as a temporary interrogation room. Inside were three guards and

Murakami sitting in the center. When the actor saw Fukuzawa, he feebly smiled before lowering his head.

“I’ve done a lot of things in my life, but this is the first time I’ve ever been handcuffed.” He showed the handcuffs around his wrists and smiled. “Everything’s an experience. This’ll only enrich my acting.”

Fukuzawa was both exasperated and impressed at the same time. It appeared that performers faced a fate incomprehensible to most.

“I have two or three things I want to ask you.”

“Be my guest.”

“I want to see the device that made the blade come out of your stomach.”

“Oh, that? It’s over there.”

Murakami pointed at the device with his chin. Leaning against the wall was a thin, cylindrical instrument that looked as if a sheet of metal had been bent into a circle. It was as thick as a human’s torso, with piano string–like wire with a loop on the end sticking out.

Murakami explained how he wrapped it around his waist and hid it under his clothes. Then he ran the piano wire through his costume and pulled it to tug the metal plate over his stomach open. The metal plate was thin, and its surface was finely polished, which was probably what made it look like a blade under the powerful lights. It was a rather simple device to understand after hearing how it worked. It was a device only a theatrical performer would have thought of due to his familiarity with how props appeared to the audience.

“The biggest hurdle was seeing whether it would fool the first person who came running over,” Murakami boasted with a smirk. “I knew you were used to seeing dead bodies, being a bodyguard and all. That’s why I was cheering on the inside when my acting fooled you. It’s an accomplishment I’ll be proud of for the rest of my life.”

And as a result, everyone in the crowd was deceived, and the police were utterly confused. Fukuzawa couldn’t blame him, especially since he wasn’t the type to lecture others. He simply said, “You’re hopeless.”

“You could say that again.” Murakami smiled.

“There is one more thing I want to ask you,” continued Fukuzawa. “It’s about the man in the suit who was tied up and unconscious. Who is he? Why did you do that to him?”

“Oh, that guy? I heard he’s...another one of the plan’s objectives,” said Murakami with a shrug.

“You ‘heard’?”

“Yes. Originally, I came up with this plan with the playwright, Kurahashi, but he apparently had his own goals in mind. I don’t know all the details...but apparently that man in the suit rarely ever shows himself, so meeting him was one of Kurahashi’s goals or something. I wasn’t expecting him to catch the guy and tie him up, though.”

“What?” Fukuzawa knitted his brows, at which moment—

“The suspect! Bring me the suspect!”

—what sounded like pounding footsteps was immediately followed by the door to the dressing room being thrown open. A slightly older detective stood at the doorway, trying to catch his breath.

“What happened?” asked Fukuzawa.

“W-Watchdog! We’ve got big trouble! Has the suspect been here this entire time?!”

“He’s been under surveillance the whole time, as you can see.”

Fukuzawa glanced at the nervous-looking actor, whose eyes were darting back and forth between Fukuzawa and the detective. It seemed he had no idea what was going on.

“The playwright—he was found dead in his home! Somebody killed him!”

“What?!”

The detective spoke while trying to catch his breath, his eyes shaking with fear.

“The door to his room was locked, and something impaled him from behind—

but there was no weapon or any signs of a struggle at the scene! It's like an invisible person just came in and stabbed him!"

Ranpo Edogawa sat in the back of the police car alone, idly gazing at the nightscape as it went by. The sun had disappeared before anyone even noticed. As darkness with hints of blue hung over the city of Yokohama, only white and yellow lights drew his eye as they drifted across the car window's glass like rain. Ranpo stared at the city while resting his elbow on the door. The city's night was bright. The countryside he grew up in didn't have artificial light, and everyone would be getting ready for bed at this hour.

The city is so much better.

Ranpo was absorbed in thought. Boisterous and puzzling still beat out quiet and dismal in his book. He hated the countryside. He hated the people, the school, and essentially everything else there. The only thing he liked was his parents.

"Hey, Officer." Ranpo suddenly struck up conversation with the young cop driving. "How much longer until we get there?"

"We're almost there," the officer answered with a bright, amiable tone.

"Oh," Ranpo vaguely replied before returning his gaze to the city.

After glancing at Ranpo through the rearview mirror, the officer cheerfully said:

"You really impressed me today! Seriously, that deduction made me emotional! You're a real mini detective! You and Fukuzawa make a great team together. I can already see your name in tomorrow's morning paper!"

"Eh, what can I say? But I don't think that old guy's gonna team up with me."

"Huh? Really? I totally thought you two were—"

"He's afraid of others," Ranpo bluntly stated.

A few seconds of silenced passed through the car.

"Uh... That bodyguard guy's supposedly a master martial artist. Plus, he's

known to be extremely scary... I heard even the police and military's top brass get nervous when they meet him."

Many members of police organizations hold qualifications in kendo and jujutsu. At times, their respect for masters of the art, be in a senior disciple or instructor, surpasses professional rank and position. Therefore, a martial artist of Fukuzawa's caliber had quite a bit of influence in these organizations. In a sense, Fukuzawa was feared by both villains and police alike.

"It's not quite the same. The old guy is afraid of something else."

"Uh-huh... If you say so. You never cease to impress me. You just met Fukuzawa, and yet you've already seen right through him. I guess you can never underestimate the power of skill users, huh? What was it again? 'The ability to uncover the truth'?"

"Yep," confirmed Ranpo with a relaxed nod. "But you don't believe that, do you?"

"Wait, wait, wait. Of course I do," the officer replied in a panic. He then assumed a fake smile in a troubled manner. "Heh... I guess the cat's out of the bag?"

"You wouldn't even need to be a skill user to see through you. You mentioned that I had 'just met Fukuzawa,' which meant you called headquarters and found out that he and I first met this morning during the case of the murdered CEO. Why? Because you wanted to know how good I was."

"I'm impressed. I underestimated you."

"I don't blame you. I don't like being doubted, so...how about I prove to you that I'm a skill user?"

Ranpo pulled out a pair of black-framed glasses from his pocket—his priceless gift from Fukuzawa.

"Oh, are you sure? What a treat. Feels like I've got a front-row seat to the honored skilled detective's show."

Ranpo put on his glasses with a sigh, then looked out the window.

"This car isn't going to the police station, is it?"

Silence. Ranpo and the officer exchanged glances through the rearview mirror until a few moments went by.

“Sigh. You got me,” admitted the officer as he scratched his cheek. *“I should have mentioned it before, but I got a call over the radio earlier. They told me there was an accident and to bring the great detective with me.”*

“I see,” said Ranpo. His tone conveyed no indication as to how he was feeling.

“But you wouldn’t need to be a skill user to guess that much, right? I mean, I’m not doubting you, though. I just thought that since the police station was near the train station, it would be pretty obvious that we weren’t going there.”

“You’re exactly right.” Ranpo grinned. *“Shall we raise the bar, then? How about this? You’ll ask questions about today’s incident, and I’ll use my skill to answer. If I get stumped, you win. If I uncover all the mysteries, I win. How does that sound?”*

“Oh, now we’re talking! It doesn’t matter whether I win or lose because this is going to be fun! There’s no reason for me to say no! Can I start?”

“Be my guest,” Ranpo said.

The officer then pondered to himself for a few seconds while tilting his head.

“I’m sure this is something everyone wanted to ask, but...” The officer tapped the steering wheel with his finger as he spoke. *“Like, you remember that man in the suit who was tied up onstage? The one who used the fake name. How was he captured and carried to that spot behind the screen?”*

“Using a rug,” replied Ranpo while pushing up his glasses with a finger. *“There were a few long-haired rugs near the theater entrance, right?”*

The officer looked up while rubbing his chin with a finger. *“Oh... There were, now that you mention it.”*

“After the panic, one of those rugs went missing,” claimed Ranpo. *“The floor was bare, and there was a faint but strange smell coming from where the rug used to be. What’s that stuff called again? The stuff you find in paint and plastic that has that weird smell...”*

“Organic solvent?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Ranpo nodded. “It was faint, but I smelled the same thing coming from the man who was tied up. In other words, the criminal wrapped that man up in the carpet and carried him there. The smell was probably coming from an adhesive. The criminal used a spray adhesive on the carpet to catch that suited man as he tried to escape. Then he used some drug to knock him out before rolling him up in the rug and taking him away. That man must be really good at running away for someone to go through that much trouble.”

“Hmm... Well, the stage was very hectic after the incident with ambulance crew and performers cleaning up blood and whatnot, so I guess if someone came walking through with a rug, they wouldn’t really stand out... But why? I know the accomplice was probably the one who carried him, but why would he go through all that trouble?”

“It wasn’t the playwright.”

“Huh?”

“The playwright didn’t even lift a finger. In fact...*he was probably killed before the play even started,*” Ranpo added as if it were obvious. A change came over the officer’s countenance.

“Th-that can’t... Then who?”

“Everyone—other than me, of course—is so stupid and foolish and oh so lovable for it, which is why I wanted to save as many people as I could,” Ranpo said as he languidly rolled his neck. “But there’s nothing I can do for people who die before I know the truth, and that includes that elderly man who was killed solely to deceive.”

“Elderly man...?” asked the officer.

“I’m talking about that poor elderly man who died at the hospital in Murakami’s place,” said Ranpo with a subtle lift of his brow. “When I was explaining how I solved the mysteries, I lied that Murakami probably switched out IDs with someone who just happened to be similarly injured like him. But wouldn’t that just be too convenient for something so important to the trick? It was unnatural. It wouldn’t make sense for someone who was elaborate and bold with his scheme to leave things to luck like that. They waited for the perfect moment to stab and kill that elderly man. *Sigh...* All that just to kidnap a

single man?”

“Do you mean...the murder wasn’t the objective?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. This large-scale scheme was put together solely for the purpose of kidnapping that gentleman in the suit. It was one long, elaborate trap. The playwright and Murakami were being used as well. They’re nothing more than pawns, too... Now do you believe I’m a skill user?”

“I—I...”

Ranpo leaned toward the flustered officer. “So how about you just tell me where this car is *really* heading?”

He then brought his head to the side of the driver’s seat and whispered into the man’s ear:

“I can smell organic solvent on your clothes, Officer.”

“Why can’t you get ahold of him?!” roared Fukuzawa.

The second floor of the theater was being used as a temporary police station where they were holding a meeting.

“I told you, I wish I could, but they still haven’t arrived at the station. They should have had plenty of time to get there, though...”

Three officers were sitting in the theater’s conference room while exchanging information with their colleagues over the phone. The moment Fukuzawa heard that the playwright had been killed, he knew. The case still wasn’t over yet. If anything, this was only the beginning.

Because...

“There were two factors to this murder... You can think of it like a shrimp and a whale.”

Ranpo knew that from the very start. He knew there were two sides to this case. He figured out there was a greater, more sinister side to this other than the staged murder. The playwright was dead. This wasn’t a sham, but a real

murder. Murakami had been clearly flustered ever since he heard the news. He was honestly confused and kept asking the police to explain things over and over again.

Fukuzawa felt in his gut that this wasn't an act. While he was nowhere near as talented as Ranpo when it came to observation and reasoning, Fukuzawa had sharp enough insight to see that Murakami's fear was real. Even a famous performer like him had forgotten how to act. Regardless, the playwright's house where he was found was rather far away from the theater, and Murakami had been under police surveillance ever since Ranpo finished his stage monologue. Timewise, it would have been physically impossible for him to go to the playwright's house, kill him, and return to the theater before that.

Who was really the one pulling the strings?

Who was the real culprit?

According to Ranpo:

"It'd be easy to catch the shrimp...but if you want to get the whale, you're gonna have to use the shrimp."

He'd probably already figured out who the "whale" was. Murakami was obviously the shrimp. Ranpo implied that the shrimp was the mediocre part of this case. It made sense, though. Nobody died, and solving the case itself wasn't that difficult, either. Even without Ranpo, Murakami wouldn't have been able to live as a dead man and hide out for the rest of his life. The truth would have come to light.

But in the end, only half the case was solved. There was someone pulling the strings who used Murakami and the playwright for their scheme. The only person who could have answered that was dead. Now the only one who could follow the lost path to the real criminal...was Ranpo.

What if Ranpo's sensationalized monologue onstage was all part of a bigger plan? What if his plan to catch the whale was still ongoing?

"What was the name of the police officer taking Ranpo to the station?" Fukuzawa asked.

"Jun Mitamura," answered the detective, intimidated by Fukuzawa.

“Why can’t you reach him?”

“That’s odd... His cell phone is turned off. He isn’t answering his radio, either.”

Fukuzawa began to get impatient.

What happened during the short amount of time he took his eyes off Ranpo? It didn’t matter that the kid was a quick-thinking genius. Even if he had already found out who was behind this and was trying to lure them out, he wouldn’t stand a chance if they attacked him. He was still just a boy, and the darkness of this lawless city was rampant with violence. Some wouldn’t even hesitate to kill a child like Ranpo.

“I’ll go look for them.” Fukuzawa quickly retired from the conference room.

Something had to have happened to Ranpo while he was heading to the station. Fukuzawa racked his brain, briskly walking forward. Did Ranpo have a plan? But he had no idea how corrupt this city was. Ranpo thought he knew everything, but he wasn’t a skill user. There was no way for him to know something unless he saw it with his own eyes.

And the one who made Ranpo believe he was a skill user was none other than Fukuzawa himself. He strode through the lobby until he reached the front entrance. Most of the patrons had left, and the area was now quiet. The moment he walked outside, he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye where Ranpo had gotten into the police car. When he strained his eyes, he saw something white by the building’s wall and decided to check it out. It was a white business card. A rock was lying on top, perhaps to keep it from being blown away by the wind. When Fukuzawa got close enough, he immediately recognized that it was his business card.

It can’t be—

He picked it up, and sure enough, it did have his name and contact information on it. He couldn’t discern who he originally gave it to, though. Fukuzawa flipped the card over. Messily written on the back in pencil was:

Mitamura is the real culprit. Search for the cane.

“No way. Come on.” Mitamura shook his head while smiling as he drove. “I can’t believe such an extraordinary skill user slipped under our radar.”

Ranpo didn’t respond. He simply stared at Mitamura through the rearview mirror with his young, piercing gaze behind the glasses.

“I guess it would be impolite to make excuses or deny it in the face of such a master detective. Now that you’ve found me out, I should probably do the right thing and tell you the truth and my motives,” Mitamura continued with a smile. “Just wait a little bit longer, please. There’s a more fitting place up ahead for me to welcome you, Master Detective.”

“All right, but make it quick,” Ranpo demanded with indifference. “It’s already late, so I’m getting tired.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The police car drove through the city night until it reached a seemingly empty commercial district. Driving down a road with no streetlights, they soon reach a brand-new four-story building and park.

“We’re here. Officially, this building’s an office for a ‘shipbuilding company’ if you know what I mean,” Mitamura joked while looking up at the building. “In reality, we own it. It’s what they call a shell company. Now, come. Please watch your step.”

Ranpo got out of the car as requested, and they walked through the empty building’s front door. At a glance, it looked just like any other building in the city. However, there were no lights on inside, nor were there any guards. As Mitamura and Ranpo continued to walk, all that illuminated the dusk was the greenish hue of the emergency lights.

“This way, please.”

Mitamura opened a glass door. The room was empty, but one of the walls was completely made from glass, giving a clear view of Yokohama’s skyline in the distance. Ranpo started entering the room as requested before speaking up.

“A gun?”

“Hmm?”

“That thing. The gun.”

Ranpo pointed at Mitamura’s waist. Hanging there was a city police–issued black revolver.

“I’ve never wanted to die before, but I don’t want it to hurt when I do. I’ve thought about it, though. The moment the bullet pierces your head probably hurts. But I’ve never talked to a dead guy before, so I can’t say for sure.”

“Ha-ha. I’m not going to shoot you with this.” Mitamura smiled while touching his gun. Then his eyes narrowed. “...As long as you do as I say.”

Fukuzawa quickly passed through the empty theater’s hallway to the auditorium. Everyone had already gone home, and only Fukuzawa’s footsteps eerily echoed. His expression was intense, but there was no hesitation in his gaze. There was only one thing that came to mind when he saw the word *cane*. He casually climbed up onto the stage, stepped over the faint stain of blood, and headed toward the back.

Fukuzawa immediately found the cane. Underneath the white fabric screen that Ranpo tore down was a T-shaped cane casually lying on the ground. It was somewhat old, but the grip had gold foil decorations embedded in it, suggesting high-end quality. The polished body seemed to be made from a camellia tree. It was the cane that the suited gentleman had been using.

Fukuzawa hadn’t heard where the owner of the cane was currently. Some said he was taken to the hospital, while others said he ran away to avoid any complicated matters that may have followed. If he ran away, then there would be no way of finding him now. The cane was what was important at the moment. Fukuzawa immediately noticed something was off when he held it: The center of gravity was somewhat high. Such a small oddity would be noticed only by someone who had held countless wooden swords and real swords, such as Fukuzawa. He carefully checked the handle and noticed a pronounced gap among the decorative gold. Something about as thick as a sheet of paper could be slid into the crack.

He first thought it was a sword cane, a typical weapon for an assassin. It was deadly, as well as something Fukuzawa used on rare occasions, so he was very familiar with them.

But this was different. There wasn't enough space to hide a blade. Then what could it have been used for?

He held down the hidden notch while twisting the handle until the decorations indeed came off, revealing the inside.

“...?”

It was empty. No weapon, no drugs—there was nothing there. It was just a hollowed-out piece of wood.

Why would Ranpo ask me to find this?

Fukuzawa looked into the cavity. It was surprisingly deep. Using what little light he had, he measured the depth. A document could fit inside if it were rolled up first.

—A currently empty crevice.

—A document.

I see.

Fukuzawa figured it out: *Whatever was inside had already been taken.* It was only reasonable to come to such a conclusion. There was probably something inside it when the suited gentleman was carrying it. Was he bringing it somewhere? Or was he simply trying to keep it close by? He was knocked unconscious, and whatever was in there—perhaps a document of some sort considering the size—was stolen. Then the cane was tossed away after serving its purpose.

The mystery of the suited gentleman, the mystery of the empty cane, and the mystery of the real culprit who had stolen what was inside—there were many questions stemming from this single cane. But it gave no clues to what Fukuzawa needed to know the most: Where was Ranpo?

So Ranpo didn't leave that message to tell Fukuzawa where he was. And the message was clearly from Ranpo; nobody else would have left a note accusing

someone of being the true culprit. Was there something else to this cane?

Fukuzawa pondered. Ranpo didn't have time to touch or check the cane. Even then, he knew there was more to it, which is why he told Fukuzawa to find it. While Ranpo may have had unattainable heights of insight, he figured something out about the cane without even touching it. Failing to find out what that was even after examining it was starting to make Fukuzawa feel as if he had failed as an adult.

The only thing that caught Fukuzawa's attention was how relatively easy it felt getting to the hidden cavity. This would be fine for sword canes that needed to be unsheathed at the drop of a hat, but it had to be a lot harder to open for something that was solely made to hide a document.

Fukuzawa discovered the cavity almost instantly. The person who stole whatever was inside probably found out how to open it quickly as well. Perhaps it was a slight oversight.

But from Fukuzawa's point of view, this carelessness didn't match with the impression he had. The gentleman was big game. The culprit had to set up this entire scheme to catch him, since he was so cautious that he had tried to escape the theater the moment he detected something was wrong.

Which meant there was only one other possibility.

Fukuzawa observed the cavity once more. It was perfectly curved without a scratch. He touched it with a finger. To his senses, the polished wood felt almost like a perfect circle. He put his finger in the hole and held the inside while firmly pulling the cane. After a few moments, he felt the inside slightly move. He pulled some more. Thereupon, the inside of the cane *popped* right out. It was what they call a false bottom, a gimmick to trick thieves into stealing whatever unimportant thing was stuffed in the first cavity. In other words, the real hiding place was in the back side of the interior cylinder.

Fukuzawa gazed into the cylinder he pulled out and instinctively knitted his brows. The back side was an electronic memory device. There was nothing else suspicious about it. Bonded onto the surface of the cylinder was a curved circuit board. Even Fukuzawa almost immediately knew what he was looking at: an ultrathin memory terminal. The hidden cavity was a red herring. While it was a

false-bottom cane, the walls of the cylinder itself were the real carriers of information. Fukuzawa had heard rumors of an organization who transported information like this.

“Then that means...,” Fukuzawa grunted.

That suited gentleman was *a skill user*, and he was hiding from a criminal syndicate after him. Now there was finally enough information to reason who the real culprit was.

Fukuzawa began to walk without even a second of hesitation. He could finally see, albeit dimly, the whale that Ranpo was trying to catch.

“So where are we?” Ranpo indifferently asked as he stared out the window.

“One of our more convenient bases. As you can see, we can do whatever we want at night without being seen or heard here. It’s the perfect place to do anything, whether it be hiding, having a secret meeting, or—”

“Torturing someone?” Ranpo blurted out, causing Officer Jun Mitamura to raise his eyebrows in a theatrical show of surprise.

“Oh my. I thought I made myself clear earlier. I brought you here simply so we could welcome the great detective into our home. The thought of torture didn’t even cross my mind. This is all one big misunderstanding.”

“Those are a lot of armed guards for a misunderstanding. There were four—no, five of them, weren’t there?” claimed Ranpo with a nonchalant shrug. Mitamura fell silent, seemingly caught by surprise. The guards were perfectly hidden. They were all hired from the outside—foreign ex-military—and they had been trained to be able to observe their target without leaving a single trace. They had been watching from a blind spot, not once ever leaving a footprint or clearing their throat.

“Wow... You never cease to impress me.” Mitamura scratched his head in a troubled manner. “How did you know?”

“I told you already. That’s my skill,” said Ranpo as he put on his glasses.

“Hmm...” After thinking for a moment, Mitamura spread out his arms as if to

show he meant no harm. “Well done. But I want to make sure this is clear so that there are no misunderstandings. Those men have absolutely no interest in harming you. They were originally brought here to stand guard and keep an eye on the target—the man in the suit who you revealed onstage to the entire audience. So, essentially, they are just working overtime right now. After all, who knows what kind of lawless thug might come after the world’s greatest detective?”

“Lawless thug, huh...? Wish I knew who you were referring to. Anyway, why’d you bring me here?” asked Ranpo as he took a seat in the nearby chair.

“We have ourselves a little situation. As you well know, we had a rather elaborate plan in motion at the theater, so the higher-ups are pretty pissed off. They told me to catch the guy who messed everything up. Wanted me to make you talk. Figure out how you knew the truth. Figure out where you got that leaked information. Rather shortsighted if you ask me. Oh, and don’t even get me started on the confidential document I found in that man’s cane. Good grief. It was a fake. Can you believe it?” Mitamura shrugged melodramatically. “Of course, it’s a big deal if someone leaked our plan to an outside source. It’s a matter of internal discipline, after all. But you and me, Great Detective, know that’s not the case. It was all thanks to your supernatural ability. That’s why it doesn’t matter how hard I squeeze you to get an information source out of you. It doesn’t exist, right?”

“...”

Mitamura glanced at Ranpo’s silent expression before continuing.

“But you know how it is with honor and dignity and all that. I can’t let you go that easily, so I’m having a little dilemma here. As things are now, the boss is going to make us hurt you even though we don’t want to, and you wouldn’t want that, right? I know I wouldn’t. So here’s my offer...”

Mitamura took a step forward in the dim room. His shadow grew lengthwise in the light coming through the window from the night outside. He sat before Ranpo, who was closing his eyes, then whispered:

“...How about joining us?”

An uncomfortable silence reigned over the room.

“We are men with ambition. Our only wish is to cleanse this country of evil, and we would love to have a talented skill user such as yourself. What do you say?”

The backlight obscured Mitamura’s face in the darkness, but one could easily imagine his cold, thin smile from the abyss.

“...Hmm?” Ranpo, sitting down, lifted his head up and looked in the direction of the gaze. “Oh, sorry. You just kept going on and on, so I got bored and stopped listening... Could you make it more interesting next time?”

Mitamura’s face froze. A tense air filled the room.

Fukuzawa was rushing toward an underground prison. It was a square, one-story building adjacent to the police station. He had already contacted them in advance, so he greeted the guards and headed straight down the long staircase. Unlike a detention cell that temporarily held suspects, the facility was built with the principal aim to keep any criminals from ever leaving. Fukuzawa reached a thick steel double door. There were no windows in the cell, and the walls were reinforced with steel frames. In the back was a boy.

“You awake?”

The boy wore a straitjacket and was constrained with multiple chains in the empty concrete room. He slowly looked up. His empty, emotionless eyes were a reddish brown. Fukuzawa looked through the narrow observation window on the door and saw the assassin’s face. It was the hit man from this morning who’d killed the secretary. He quietly stared at Fukuzawa from under his short crimson hair, not so much as a hint of emotion in his eyes.

“How’s the cell?”

“Not as bad as some others. The air-conditioning works.”

Even Fukuzawa, who had faced numerous villains and assassins, had never seen eyes like his. Most skilled hit men looked down on others as if they were insects. Their eyes were cold and lacked compassion. But this boy’s were different. They weren’t cold or any temperature. They were just empty. Not only was there no compassion or kindness, there was no hate or passion to kill.

His eyes were those of a person who had given up all hope and despair—the eyes of a person who had removed himself from emotional things.

This kid's different from the old me. Perhaps he never felt any joy from killing others. He was probably only killing because he had nothing else to do.

“I came because there’s something I want to ask you,” Fukuzawa said, facing the observation window. “Have a look at this.”

Fukuzawa held out the case toward the observation window, showing the cylinder with the memory device.

“This is a memory device used by a certain national organization. It needs special equipment to be deciphered, and stealing the information inside is next to impossible. It’s used by people under the witness protection program so they can remain invisible to the public while exchanging information with the witness protection organization. In other words, key figures targeted by criminal organizations would possess this device. Furthermore, there’s something all these key figures have in common. *They’re all skill users.*”

Fukuzawa closely observed the hit man, but the hit man’s gaze didn’t change.

“Now let’s talk about why I’m here. You are a highly skilled assassin who’s worked for outside organizations as well, I’m sure. So have you received any *requests to capture a skill user* as of late?”

The boy didn’t answer.

“Which is it?”

“...I can’t reveal my clients,” answered the boy in a hoarse voice.

“Doesn’t have to be about your clients’ requests.” Fukuzawa tried to bargain. “Have you heard recently about anybody around here searching for someone who could capture a skill user alive? It’s a difficult target, someone who pops up randomly and is currently under the witness protection program. The client would have asked for this man to be found and captured alive in secret. The payment would have been exceptional, and the client would have kept their identity confidential. The client would have probably called themselves ‘Angel’ or ‘V.’”

The moment the boy heard the name “V,” his shoulders twitched. *This assassin knows something*, Fukuzawa thought.

The government, which didn’t officially acknowledge the existence of skill users, was secretly protecting those skill users, and the gentleman in the suit was most likely one of them. They were preeminent figures even in this city, beings sought after by foreign military parties, domestic criminal organizations, and countless enemies. It wasn’t clear why these people were after them, but it wouldn’t be a stretch to say they held secrets connected to the foundation of the country.

A run-of-the-mill group of thugs wouldn’t even be able to find a footprint left by someone of that caliber. Even if they did find them, they wouldn’t be able to break through the witness protection organization’s police line unless they were a top-class assassin. Plus, the organization behind this—the so-called V—refused to dirty their own hands. They would solely use people from the outside.

That was why an assassin of this level would have surely heard of a job like this. There was no way “V” would ignore such a convenient hit man who was talented but didn’t work for any specific group.

“...I don’t want to talk about them.” The young man finally spoke up. He had a boy’s voice, but his tone sounded like a worn-out elderly man with no emotions. “Do you know what their goal is?”

“No,” replied Fukuzawa.

All he knew was that this criminal organization set up an entire scheme and got everyone in the theater involved just to capture one man.

“Justice,” said the hit man. “I can understand killing for money or because you hated someone, but they’re killing *for justice*. I don’t want to get involved with a group like that. After they’re done killing for their justice, they’ll only continue to kill. They’ll just stop caring who they’re killing.”

Those were heart-wrenching words to Fukuzawa, and he almost uttered a cry.

“I’m not ordering you to fight them,” Fukuzawa said, managing to keep his voice calm. “They kidnapped my friend. Do you know of any place they could be

keeping him?”

The boy shot a piercing gaze at Fukuzawa. His eyes were open wide.

“...I’ve got no reason to tell you.”

“True,” agreed Fukuzawa. “But if you do tell me, I wouldn’t mind testifying that the secretary’s death this morning was the result of an accident during a struggle. You’d be released tomorrow.”

Something like surprise faintly wavered in the boy’s gaze. “...Are you being serious?”

Fukuzawa nodded in silence.

“I’m shocked.” The boy shook his head. “I didn’t think you were the kind of person who would turn their back on justice for a deal.”

Fukuzawa himself was just as taken aback. Never once had he made a deal with a criminal. However, it was surprisingly easy for him to make this decision. Maybe he would regret things by tomorrow. Maybe he would remember this decision and feel guilty one day. But now, at this moment, there was neither contradiction nor regret in Fukuzawa’s heart.

He had to save Ranpo...because Ranpo was an *idiot*. He was naive and rash and still just a kid who didn’t think through things far enough. In fact, he was foolish enough to use himself as bait to lure out the real culprit.

Fukuzawa had come to this conclusion on his way to the underground prison. Ranpo allowed himself to be kidnapped to lure out the enemy, and he intended to have Fukuzawa save him. That was probably a flawless plan to Ranpo. It was probably the only way to drag out the real culprit, who would never show their face in public otherwise.

If that was what Ranpo was thinking, then that would make him extremely foolish.

Fukuzawa had to find Ranpo, but if he were outnumbered and outclassed when he found the enemy’s hideout, then Ranpo would still be killed. They weren’t the kind of people who would let someone live after they knew the truth. What Ranpo thought was a bright idea was not even worth considering

from Fukuzawa's point of view. It was as foolish as swimming in a swamp in the middle of winter, and that was exactly why Fukuzawa couldn't abandon him.

"So? Will you take the deal?"

The assassin stared at Fukuzawa for a few moments.

"This facility isn't that bad," admitted the boy as he looked around the room. "Besides, I can escape whenever I want on my own, so your offer isn't worth it."

It would take at least a fully armed platoon to escape from this facility. And yet, Fukuzawa's gut told him that this boy wasn't lying.

"Then what would be worth your time?"

The boy quietly stared at the floor for a few seconds.

"I've been working alone as an assassin for as long as I can remember," he began. "I've never wanted friends or a boss, but...seeing a master martial artist like you compromise your principles to save one of your men... It makes me kinda jealous. He must be the happiest guy in the world to have you as his boss."

Fukuzawa was about to correct him.

Ranpo wasn't his subordinate, and he wasn't cut out to be anyone's boss. If anything, he was the same as this boy. He avoided organizations and bonding with others.

However, what came out of Fukuzawa's mouth was:

"You think so?"

The words that slipped off his tongue were completely different from what he wanted to say. The boy quietly nodded.

"I heard they use a few buildings to do business. You should probably start checking the ones closest first."

Fukuzawa was at a loss for words until the boy looked up at him.

"This place gives me a bed, and it's got air-conditioning, but the food's awful," said the boy. "I heard you had some influence over the higher-ups in the police force. Could you hook me up? That's all I need."

Fukuzawa slightly narrowed his eyes, then asked, “Any requests?”

The boy gave the faintest of smirks. He then replied:

“Curry.”

“Listen, Master Detective Ranpo. This is the best deal you are going to get. It’s either you take the deal, or they squeeze the information out of you. Which is it going to be? I don’t think you’re in any position to negotiate.”

Mitamura took a step forward. Sitting in a chair and swinging his legs about, Ranpo absentmindedly replied, “‘Negotiate’? I have no intention of negotiating, and when the conversation doesn’t interest me, it just goes in one ear and out the other. Just sounds like a cow mooing to me. Moooo.”

Mitamura’s eyebrow suddenly twitched. Still, he rubbed his forehead in an attempt to hold back his emotions.

“Listen, Ranpo. You’re extremely lucky that I’m the one here negotiating with you. The others probably would have sawed off your toes by now. But I saw your marvelous skill, which is why I’m being sincere when I—”

“Oh, hey. There it is again. Moooo.”

“...Rrgh!” Mitamura reflexively reached for the gun at his waist. His hand trembled in rage as he tried to control himself. As the tension in his muscles shook his arm, he said, “I am trying...to treat you like an adult. My job at the theater was to make sure the plan went smoothly and to deal with the aftermath. If you’re out of the picture, then nobody will ever know what really happened. And yet, here I am opening up to you, telling you the truth, and trying to negotiate with you like a grown man. I am doing all of this in good faith.”

“That would sound a lot more convincing without the vein bulging out of your forehead. What you’re saying is I better work for you or you’ll kill me. Where’s the good faith in that? Besides, people at the top like me do what they want.” Ranpo shrugged. “In any case, we’re talking about me, a genius detective and skill user. Did you really think I’d let you take me all the way outside of town to be threatened without a plan?”

“...!”

Mitamura reflexively pulled his gun on Ranpo, but Ranpo simply looked down the barrel. “...You’re lying,” said Mitamura. “I searched you. You didn’t have a transmitter.”

“That’s because I don’t need one.” Ranpo’s lips slightly curled, and the muscles around Mitamura’s jaw tensed.

“Fine. Then let me be honest with you. It pisses me off that a brat like you ruined our plan, and your arrogance gets on my nerves. So your skill lets you see the truth? So what? A pathetic skill like that wouldn’t even be able to stop a single bullet.”

He pulled back the hammer with his thumb. There was a click.

“But even then, I tried to be nice to you for the sake of our supreme purpose—to rid this country of the scum that plagues it—those who bring chaos—the parasites that eat away at the framework of the nation—in other words, the skill users.”

“I see. So ‘V’ is an organization of skill users that banded together to get rid of other skill users, huh?” Ranpo faintly smiled.

“We use anything we can for our purpose, whether it be a skill user or a man hiding behind the witness protection program. That’s our—”

Mitamura’s hand holding the pistol trembled. His finger tightened around the trigger.

“Get on with it already. If you’re gonna shoot me, then do it,” taunted Ranpo as he gazed into the barrel. “Oh, but wait another five seconds first, okay? Because if my predictions are correct, then in three...two...”

A blinding flash of light flooded the room.

The glass windows shattered. A black shadow then leaped into the room and landed before spinning around.

“...?! ”

Mitamura stood paralyzed. He couldn’t even hold his gun up anymore; the silhouette that had jumped in through the window was expelling enough

bloodlust to kill a lion. Immediately, Mitamura was knocked into the corner of the room.

“Gwah...!”

After slamming him against the wall, the shadow grabbed Mitamura’s collar and swiftly threw him before he could even fall to the ground. The speed of the throw created the afterimage of an arc in the air. This throwing technique would usually be referred to as *seoi nage*—a shoulder throw—in jujutsu. However, a move where the opponent was launched into the ceiling before slamming into the ground with no loss of speed was beyond the scope of a shoulder throw. It was as if Mitamura had been hit by a train before losing consciousness.

Bathing in the town’s nighttime illumination, the silhouette’s shadow stretched as he stood in the center of the room. The silent warrior stood as his clothes gently fluttered.

“Fukuzawa!” Ranpo shouted with glee.

“How many are left?”

“Five!”

At that moment, footsteps ran down the hallway outside the room. There was only one door. The first soldier rushed inside. In the blink of an eye, Fukuzawa grabbed the man’s wrist as he lifted his gun and began flipping him vertically in the air—*kote gaeshi*, a throwing technique in aikido that uses the opponent’s momentum against them. As the soldier was soaring in the air, Fukuzawa further twisted his opponent’s arm and slammed him into the wall. The soldier passed out, unable to pull the trigger, never mind even seeing the man who knocked him unconscious.

Fukuzawa then went into the hallway. Men armed with rifles stood on each side as they rushed toward him. They got into stance to fire, but Fukuzawa had already disappeared. By the time the soldiers realized their wrists had been grabbed, they were already on the floor. In the midst of the confusion, they tried to fire their rifles, but their weapons had already vanished as well.

Two elbow strikes hit the soldiers in the throat. Fukuzawa had the upper hand

when it came to raw power, and in the instant before passing out, the soldiers only felt regret for underestimating their opponent.

It didn't feel like fighting against a human, or even a demon or wild animal. More specifically, it was like fighting against the laws of physics itself.

There was no way a mere gun could defeat the laws of physics. Fukuzawa silently rushed at the next armed soldier, who tried to lift up his gun in a fluster, but Fukuzawa quickly closed the few yards between them before he could. The palm strike to the soldier's chin let out a crack. As the man flew toward the ceiling, Fukuzawa gracefully ran past. But when he turned the corner, he found himself standing before a soldier with a submachine gun. It was an ambush.



“Die!”

The submachine gun could spit out seven rounds a second—and yet...the soldier couldn't even pull the trigger. He dropped the gun, clutched at his hand, and fell to his knees. A fountain pen was sticking through his palm. After throwing the pen like a projectile with godlike speed, Fukuzawa's sleeve fluttered open before slowly returning to normal. It was an old martial arts technique that used everyday items as weapons.

That was the fifth one.

“Want to keep going?” Fukuzawa asked as he approached the submachine gun-toting soldier.

The soldier held his hand and grimaced.

“...You...freak...!”

He backed off in fright and ran away, leaving his weapon and his comrades behind. Fukuzawa, however, quietly watched him escape without even attempting to go after him.

He walked over the unconscious soldiers and made his way back to the first room.

“Wow! That was awesome!” Ranpo said enthusiastically, his face split ear to ear in a joyous grin.

“Are you okay?”

“That was way above and beyond my expectations! That was the best thing ever! But, hey, looks like my calculations were right. I knew you'd make it in time. Anyway, thanks to you, the real culprit—”

Fukuzawa walked right up to Ranpo and stopped before taking in a deep breath.

“You dumbass!!”

Ranpo was hit with a powerful slap. An ear-piercing pop echoed throughout the room, and his glasses flew off.

“‘Calculations’?! You knew I'd ‘make it in time’?! What was that pointing in

your face when I arrived just now?! A gun, that's what!"

Ranpo froze after the impact of the slap made him spin halfway around. A vivid red welt grew on his cheek.

"I..."

"There is no such thing as 'for sure' in this world! If it took me even a second too long to realize what had happened—if I were even a second too late getting here—you would have been killed!"

Ranpo was stunned as he held his cheek. "B-but I knew... I knew you would come."

"No, you just wanted to demonstrate what you can do!"

Ranpo bore the full brunt of Fukuzawa's rage. The yelling was so loud that even the glass started to shake.

"You're free to flaunt your gift, and you can challenge your opponents with it! But you have to stop gambling with your life! You're still—"

Fukuzawa didn't know why.

Why was he yelling this much?

Why was he this upset?

Why—?

"You're still just a kid!"

Fukuzawa's heart ached. He grimaced at the pain that was almost physical.

Why did he let this child go off on his own?

Why didn't he go with him?

Ranpo was still so young...and so weak...



“Mm... Guhhh...”

Ranpo’s lips tightened as he held his swollen red cheek. His wide-open eyes wavered as they welled with tears. Fukuzawa was immediately overcome with regret.

He had gone too far. Ranpo probably wasn’t used to be scolded like this. Surely being yelled at and even slapped would—

“But... But...”

He trembled with his head hung low.

Large tears dripped to the floor. Fukuzawa exhaled as an indescribable feeling ebbed and flowed in his heart.

Ranpo, boy genius, orphan—nobody understood him, and he was all alone in this dark, cold universe. He was thrown out into the vast world with nobody to protect him.

Even Fukuzawa himself was hesitant. He didn’t know how he should be there for Ranpo or how he should even treat him. And because he didn’t know what to do, Fukuzawa simply gently patted Ranpo on the head twice.

Ranpo latched on to Fukuzawa. The tears streamed down his cheeks without end, sinking into Fukuzawa’s clothing.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m so...sorry!”

Not knowing what to do with his arms, Fukuzawa’s hands hovered in the air. With a troubled expression, he gazed out the window into the boundless silence of the night. His eyes caught a glimpse of the round moon, white as a polished mirror. He gently stared into the moon, and it smiled back.



And then...

The case came to a close mainly thanks to Ranpo’s efforts. The newspapers the following day were only talking about Murakami’s sham, and the playwright along with the elderly man who died at the hospital after being stabbed were processed as personal crimes committed by Officer Jun Mitamura. Regardless,

Officer Mitamura was found dead in police custody after being detained. It was as if he had been stabbed by some invisible force—eerily similar to how the playwright was killed. Most likely, a skill user from the enemy organization had been dispatched to make sure no information got leaked.

Their path to the real culprit was ostensibly severed, and the case remained more or less unsolved. However, only a small number of people involved, such as Fukuzawa and Ranpo, knew the truth: Behind it all was a domestic underground syndicate known as “V,” whose goal was to rid the country of skill users.

And the battle against them was only beginning.

As for Ranpo, who’d been yelled at and mercilessly slapped...

“Hey, Fukuzawa, when’s the next case? C’mon, let’s go solve some mysteries! I’ll use my skill and solve it in a snap.”

...he had become extremely attached to Fukuzawa.

Not that Fukuzawa understood why, though.

“Fine. Just stop tugging on my sleeve. You’re going to stretch it.”

Fukuzawa softly scolded Ranpo, who cheerfully answered with an “Okay!” before letting go.

A year had gone by since the incident. Unable to get rid of Ranpo and at his wits’ end, Fukuzawa had no choice but to temporarily hire Ranpo to help with miscellaneous duties. Fukuzawa came up with a plan. In return for food and clothing, Ranpo would be taught various odd jobs, social norms, and academics as well, for knowledge was the world’s foundation. Studying was necessary to live, just as oxygen was needed to survive. That was the principle by which Fukuzawa lived.

And that...was how Fukuzawa lost his job. His job was to guard his clients, but whenever he brought Ranpo to help with the paperwork, Ranpo would swiftly figure out who the risk factor for the client was and where they were...before Fukuzawa ever even needed to guard anyone. Fukuzawa couldn’t simply ignore what Ranpo was doing, so he removed the risk factor as he was pressed to do. Before long, there was no longer any need to guard the client. Some people

even began to request that only Ranpo came. Fukuzawa was on the verge of unemployment thanks to this sudden turn.

Granted, it *was* Ranpo who caused the slow business to resurge as well. Fukuzawa, with too much free time on his hands, received a new job offer, this time asking Ranpo to do some detective work. Rumors of a young detective who possessed supernatural powers capable of uncovering any truth had slowly spread throughout the city after the incident at the theater. He started receiving job offers from various strata of society and people from all different types of work, including the police. He would solve almost every case instantly at the scene of the crime.

Things were complicated for Fukuzawa, though. While it wouldn't be a problem letting Ranpo work alone, Fukuzawa accompanied him for the most part. One of the reasons was because he knew all too well how reckless and dangerous Ranpo could be, like during the incident at the theater, which was now known by many as the case of the "Murdering Angel." But for the most part, the biggest reason why he accompanied Ranpo was because he was "the only one who could control him." Ranpo was selfish and egotistical, but he listened to Fukuzawa for some reason. Maybe the slap and scolding after the first incident had had an effect on him. Or maybe there was something else that tugged at his heartstrings. In any event, Ranpo was attached to Fukuzawa and never left him alone. He was like a little puppy running around yipping, "Fukuzawa! Fukuzawa!" Even then, he would sit quietly for an hour or two if Fukuzawa ordered him to. From then on, every time a client wanted to request Ranpo's services, they would beg, "Fukuzawa, please come with him! I'll pay double!"

Before long, not a soul in the neighborhood hadn't heard of the detective duo Fukuzawa and Ranpo: a selfish and uncontrollable yet genius detective teenager and an unsociable, quiet middle-aged man who was a master of close combat and boasted extraordinary strength. There wasn't a conspiracy they couldn't see through, no enemy that could escape them, no case they couldn't crack. Murderers trembled at the sound of their footsteps, and wealthy men frequently came to pay the two their respects. Even the police sometimes visited in secret, begging for help on difficult cases. Known as skilled detectives,

Ranpo and Fukuzawa solved countless cases together. Nobody stood a chance before them as the days of prosperity and unrivaled victory continued. And that was exactly why...

...the *moment of decision* was nearing.

"Looks like this is the place," said Fukuzawa in the middle of a dark underground passage.

"Looks that way," agreed Ranpo, pushing up his glasses by Fukuzawa's side.

One day, Fukuzawa had requested Ranpo's help. He asked Ranpo to find someone who appeared in unexpected places at unexpected times—someone whom no investigative organization could get a lead on. And in spite of all this, said individual was rumored to have connections with both the government and underground organizations, along with being near every conspiracy and scheme in Yokohama.

"I'm opening the door."

In Fukuzawa's hand as he pushed the iron door in the underground passage was a dignified-looking cane. That cane was the only lead they had. Without Ranpo's powers of deduction, it would surely be impossible to find the target with such a small clue.

They strode through the dim room before descending even more stairs until they found themselves in a bright auditorium. There was a row of benches and tables with a blackboard and a teacher's desk against the front wall.

"Welcome to Bankoudou Hall," a cheerful voice echoed throughout the room. "Good work on finding the place."

Fukuzawa lightly bowed before showing the cane in his hand.

"Oh, why, if it isn't the cane I lost some time ago. You came all this way to return it to me? How commendable."

"Your reputation precedes you, sir. If you would pardon my intrusion, I came to ask a favor."

"Don't be so formal. Come, have a seat."

Fukuzawa bowed before taking a seat in the nearby chair. Ranpo, on the

other hand, quietly stared at the man before him without even moving.

“No way... I didn’t notice before, but he’s—”

“I owe you my gratitude for saving me that day, my dear boy.” The man cackled. He wasn’t wearing a suit this time, but he still had on a bowler hat.

“Oh, okay,” Ranpo mumbled as if he were standing on pins and needles. His voice was hoarse. “You saw through that trap at the theater from the beginning. You noticed the rug’s adhesive, and yet, you allowed yourself to fall into the trap. Why? Was it to lure out the enemy—? No, there were plenty of ways you could have done that—”

“Whether I did or not, I owe your father.” He smiled faintly.

Ranpo stood absolutely still as if he were struck by lightning. “Don’t tell me... From the very start, you—”

“I came with a request,” Fukuzawa abruptly said, cutting him off. “As you know, Ranpo here has been building a reputation as a skilled detective. But it is taboo in the world we live in for a skill user to go public and try to make a name for themselves. That is why I would like to request your help.”

“A Skilled Business Permit, yes?” The man grinned. “So you’re telling me...you plan on starting a business?”

“Yes,” replied Fukuzawa.

Fukuzawa asked himself:

Am I even capable of becoming a boss?

Am I prepared to be the leader of an organization?

He still didn’t have an answer. He even felt inexperienced. Fukuzawa had hidden behind his skills as a martial artist, grown frightened of the thrill of killing, and distanced himself from others, choosing to live out his years alone. He was weak and unable to reject these desires, and it even felt as if that weakness coagulated and swelled over time.

But Fukuzawa had undergone a significant change over the past year solving cases with Ranpo. He’d been thrown for a loop, what with Ranpo pulling him every which way while people praised him and begged him for help. It was a

chaotic year spent solving cases, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. But he did it all together with Ranpo, and he learned something: what it meant to be a leader, what it meant to help others as a team.

Over the past year, Fukuzawa discovered something he never expected: He still wanted to help others. He wanted to be the shield that protected the weak and the sword that vanquished the unjust. He wanted there to be fewer people who grieved over the death of a loved one at another's hands. He didn't want to pretend as if he didn't notice that the weak were being unfairly exploited. He wanted to be someone who would quietly stand before those who do wrong and scare them, dissuading them from committing misdeeds.

For lack of a better word, what he wanted in the end was justice.

He still wanted to be just. And to not repeat the same mistakes, he needed Ranpo by his side. But not only Ranpo. He needed far more allies who could fight. He wouldn't be able to protect Ranpo forever, after all. He wanted to create an aria of righteousness that would live on in this violent yet beautiful city for when he or even Ranpo was gone. And for that, he needed a team—people who were strong but kind—an armed, never-ending group of detectives based around Ranpo.

Is this an inordinate ambition, too big for me to handle?

"I beg of you." Fukuzawa lowered his head. "It wouldn't be possible to receive permission from the secret government organization, the Special Division for Unusual Powers, through half-hearted efforts. No money, connections, or abilities would ever be enough. That is why I need the help of the man rumored to know everything about this city. I need *your* help, Souseki Natsume."

"I see."

The man took a few steps before stopping in front of Fukuzawa. He quietly gazed into Fukuzawa's eyes as if he were peering right into his heart, and then... he smiled.

"It won't be easy."

That moment...

That moment was the start of it all.

It was the start of an armed organization from Yokohama whose name would soon be well-known even abroad. Standing in the twilight, a group of skill users with extraordinary talents who fought for justice and struck fear into the hearts of the wicked.

A legendary detective organization that would save countless lives under their president, the skill user Yukichi Fukuzawa.

This was the Armed Detective Agency's first step forward.

AFTERWORD

How time flies. It feels as if it were only yesterday when the second *Bungo Stray Dogs* novel was released. I spent too much time writing this novel sitting under the *kotatsu*, so I ended up hurting my back. Also, I learned I didn't have any clothes to wear to go buy clothes for meetings, and I lost yet another sock to the abyss. But I'm doing well, despite that. I also have my heart set on never wearing mismatched socks again.

I don't leave the house much due to the nature of my work, but the other day I went to the zoo for a change, where I saw a bird called a shoebill. It lorded over its surroundings with a piercing gaze befitting of a monarch. "Surrender and serve me or die resisting," it seemed to say, to which I instinctively responded "Your Excellency!" and bowed. His Excellency's expression didn't change; he simply stood still all day, barely even moving every now and then. That's when I thought to myself, *I wish I could exude such a powerful aura and spend the rest of my life doing absolutely nothing, just like His Excellency!*

At any rate, that was what I did during the time I wrote this novel. I hope you all enjoyed the two stories.

I would like to take this time to thank everyone for reading this book, and I would also like to extend my gratitude to illustrator Sango Harukawa and Editor I. for their help once more. Well, until we meet again!

KAFKA ASAGIRI

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